Joyce Shin Installation
Swarthmore Presbyterian Church
April 17, 2016

What's Next for the Church?
Mark 2: 13-22

The first thing that must be said this morning is a word of gratitude. Thanks be to God for this high and holy occasion. You have successfully negotiated the long, and sometimes tedious, process of finding a new pastor and you have called one of the brightest and best Presbyterian ministers I know. Thanks be to God that the Rev. Joyce Shin responded to what we Presbyterians describe as " the call of God through the voice of the church", and packed up and moved with her family from Chicago - where I can assure you she was respected and appreciated and deeply loved.

Thanks be to God for you - the Presbyterian Church of Swarthmore, for your long and distinguished tradition of faithful worship and witness and mission.

Thanks be to God for the bright future that lies ahead for you, and for Joyce and her family, for the Presbyterian Church USA, the Holy Catholic Church, the body of Christ in the world. More about that later. For now, gratitude for all of that and my personal thanks to you and to Joyce for inviting me to be here this morning.

I have known Joyce Shin - and Michael - for twenty plus years, when she was a student at an institution where I studied and graduated a long time ago, the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. It's a unique place, not so much a training ground for future practitioners of ministry - a theological seminary - as a place devoted, with single minded focus, to enabling men and women to think, and to bring together in creative synthesis, intellect and spirit. Joyce Shin reflects that in her own disciplined study, thoughtful and graceful preaching, compassionate pastoral care, and creative leadership. It was my very good fortune to see all that at work in a parish setting, the Fourth Presbyterian Church

of Chicago, to be her colleague and friend. She is, quite simply, one of the very best, and her installation as pastor, of this church is a happy occasion full, of much promise.

An installation is an important milestone in the life of a congregation, a graceful transition which both affirms the immediate past and embraces the present and future. It is certainly an occasion to reflect on the unique enterprise of being a church of Jesus Christ, a Presbyterian Church, in these interesting times.

We're worried about the church. We're worried about our place in American culture, a place that has changed dramatically in my lifetime. We're worried about the steady decline of our numerical strength and everything that goes along with that. In fact one of our creative members measured the rate of membership loss, projected it out into the future and calculated the exact date when the last living Presbyterian will die.

So, it's a good time to reflect on who we are and where we are going, and I know of no better way to reframe our reflecting than an incident that is described in the second chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark, near the beginning of what we know as the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the day when he sat down for dinner in the home of a man named Levi.

Beginning in his home synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus has begun to teach and preach in the rural villages of Galilee, announcing that the Kingdom of God has come and is here among us, and with it a whole new way of being faithful to God. He strikes a nerve. Everywhere he goes people are paying attention, crowds are gathering. He is saying some new and winsome things: that loving neighbors, caring for the poor and the sick, welcoming and accepting people who are not ordinarily welcomed and accepted - people with leprosy, for instance, sinners, prostitutes, is more important and pleasing to God than all their religious customs and traditions, rules and regulations, put

together. It's not that he doesn't love his religion. He loves it so much it wants to make it what it is supposed to be, wants to reform it. But to those who are invested in the status quo, he's sounding for all the world like a trouble maker, maybe even subversive - particularly on the day he sits down at Levi's table for dinner.

The trouble with sitting down for dinner at Levi's table is that Levi is a tax collector. Everybody hates the tax man. One of the biggest applause lines in the current campaign is when a candidate promises to get rid of the IRS. In that day the tax collector was a Jewish man, hired by the Romans to collect their taxes for them. To make matters worse, the tax collector was allowed to set the rates and skim the profits off the top for himself. It was a very lucrative arrangement. The down side - and it was a big one - is that everyone hated you, regarded you as a collaborator, a traitor. It was so bad that in the New Testament, "tax collectors and sinner" is almost one word. Sinners are people, mostly poor, who are too busy wondering where the next meal is coming from, trying to survive,
to have time for the rules, regulations and rituals of religion. "Sinners" includes beggars, riff raff, petty thieves, prostitutes, all of them considered "unclean", not the kind a respectable person wanted to be seen with.

One day Jesus invited Levi, the tax collector to come along and follow and that is what Levi did. For whatever reason Levi got up from his tax table and followed Jesus. I think he was so happy, so overwhelmed that someone had not despised him, looked him in the eye and called him by name, valued and respected him, that the first thing he did was go home and plan a dinner party to celebrate. And who does this man everybody hated invite to his party? The only people who would attend, the only friends he has, the only ones who do not mind at all being seen with him - other tax collectors, pan handlers and prostitutes, sinners, and his new friend, the young rabbi from Nazareth, Jesus. I've always imagined that it was quite a party: loud, boisterous, with gales of hilarity and raucous laughter, not much by way of table manners, not to mention all the religious rules and regulations.

They're having a great time. After all, it's not every day that they are invited to a party, or to anything for that matter. They're making so much noise that passersby notice and look into the courtyard where the dinner party is underway to see what is happening, and there, right in the middle of that motley crowd is Jesus and a few of his disciples, apparently having a good time. They are appalled. Religious leaders, Scribes, are particularly offended and ask his disciples, "Why is he doing this? Why is he so disrespecting our traditions and customs? He knows the proper way to eat and what to eat and who to eat with and who not to eat with."

Jesus overhears, steps outside and engages them.

"No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak - the patch will tear away and
a worse tear is made. No one puts new wine in old wineskins, otherwise the new
wine will burst the skins and both the wine and the skins are lost. One puts new
wine in new wineskins."

Sometimes those words are employed to inspire radical change, discarding everything that is old, traditional, tried and true and restart the entire enterprise, reinventing the church. Sometimes it feels like that is what some of the mega churches are trying to do. I am not suggesting that. I love our tradition, our way of being Presbyterian Christians. But I am suggesting that the words are a framework for how we think about the church, the church now and the church of the future.

We're worried. There is a lot of hand wringing about what is happening and what is to become of us.

Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote recently that everywhere he goes people ask him about the future of the church. "If you have any ideas about survival, please

let us know." Barnes call us the "Post - Anxiety Church" and observes that "the church has never looked less attractive than when it is worried about survival. Historically, that's when we made our worse mistakes. Fear makes us desperate." And I would add - dumb.

Our response to what we think is the crisis of the Mainline Church in America is either to find someone to blame...."It's the liberals"..."No, it's the evangelicals" or invest in and throw resources at trendy programs and church growth strategies. "The church" Barnes says, "has to stop fretting about its future and get back to what it has always done at its best, what it did from the beginning: stop thinking about its future survival and throw itself into its mission."

When we are distracted from that things do not go well for us.

There are several ideas about what had happened and is happening to us that I find helpful. Harvard Sociologist, Robert Putnam, known for his scholarly article and then book, Bowling Alone, has collaborated with Notre Dame professor David Campbell on a very important book, American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us. Based on their analysis of national opinion polls the authors conclude that the young adults who have abandoned the church, the "Nones" - the growing number of young Americans who check "None" in response to a question about religious preference, have dropped out because of what they hear and see about Christian religion and the church in the media. Christians they conclude in distressing numbers, are judgmental, narrow minded, intolerant, anti-science, and are obsessed with sex, reproductive rights and abortion, gender orientation and particularly Gay marriage. It's what they hear and see on television and read in the newspapers. With loud and strong support from evangelical Christians North Carolina and Mississippi just passed laws that allow public discrimination against a segment of the population. So they leave and don't come back.

Another intriguing idea about what is happening to the church

is one the late Phyllis Tickle came up with. Every five hundred years, she says, the church has the equivalent of a giant rummage sale. Beginning with King David and moving forward in history in five hundred year intervals, the most recent one - the Protestant Reformation and Counter Reformation five hundred years ago, the people of God have experienced a traumatic shake up - a rummage sale. We're in the midst in one now, she proposes. Old, worn out stuff is being discarded: new structures are emerging. It is clearly happening in all the traditional old denominations, none more so than our own.

In the meantime, what should a church like this one be doing? Princeton's Craig Barnes, says you should be doing what you have always done at your best. Being the People of God in Swarthmore Pennsylvania....Going to church on Sunday morning. Joining your hearts, minds and voices in praise and worship of God. It's the heart of who you are and a practice that is a counter cultural activity these days. I think we forget what a daring, audacious act it is to come together on a Sunday morning for the sole purpose of being together in the presence of, turning your heart and mind, your intellect and energy and imagination and love to the acknowledgement of the One who created you and who loves you without condition.

In a wonderful book of essays, The Givenness of Things, Pulitzer Prize winning author, Marilynne Robinson, writes a lot about her Christian Faith and her fondness for John Calvin. She is particularly impressed with Calvin's emphasis on preaching as the way the will and word of God is spoken and heard. She has spent many hours listening to sermons on her little Iowa church, ..."the extraordinary moment when someone attempts to speak in good faith about something that matters, and people in good faith listen." She goes to church regularly, she says, in hopes of hearing sown thing that acknowledges the sacred.

That is why you are here, at a moment and in a culture that does not always acknowledge it, that we live in the presence of holiness, sacredness, which is to say in the presence of the God who created us, knows us by name, and loves us passionately,

unconditionally. There isn't anything more counter culture than that.

And because of that basic, radical affirmation, the church of the future will be a place where the sanctity and dignity and value of every individual is remembered, celebrated and protected. We are, at the moment, in the midst of a political campaign that is appealing, not to that fundamental Judeo-Christian affirmation and, by the way, the very foundation of this republican democracy of ours - that individuals, regardless of their ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation are sacred and deserve to be valued and respected, not bullied, abused, subjected to racial or religious prejudice.

The church of the future will surely remember that it's very purpose, it's mission is to serve the world God so dearly loves and for which its Lord and Savior died. It will be a church that asks every day not what our growth strategy is, but what ought we be doing to serve our community, our nation, our world.

I don't know what the church of the future will look like. But I think there is a hint in that old grainy black and white picture in the church's family picture album. It's a picture of that dinner party at Levi's house two thousand years ago: a church - and a faith - based not so much on getting all its beliefs and creeds right, all its theology absolutely orthodox, all its rules and regulations correct - as it in on getting Jesus right, when he sat down for dinner with Levi and his friends.

I think the church of the future will reach out in respect and gratitude to people of other faith traditions, not to condemn or threaten or even to convert, but to listen and learn.

I think the church of the future will be as shockingly inclusive as Jesus was, and that it will live its life in the world as thoroughly as he did, with its doors wide open, it's sacraments and traditions open as wide as his arms were when he died on the cross, it's resources as invested in serving the world as were his resources

of love and passion and life and blood that he poured out on the cross,

And I think the church of the future will be as grateful and joyful and confident as his first followers were when the reality of the Resurrection sank in because - after that - there s nothing in the world to be afraid of, certainly not what is coming in the future.

We're still,in the Season of Easter - Eastertide - still remembering resurrection, the dawn of something altogether new: life over death, love over hate, hope over resignation. The church of the future will be as grateful and joyful and confident as his first followers were when the reality of resurrection sank in, because - after that - everything he did and said is in a new light: that when Jesus said love and forgiveness and generosity and service and self giving are what really matter he was speaking eternal truth, as he was when he promised one day that his church - that's us- will withstand everything, even the gates of hell.

After Easter morning, there is nothing in life, nothing in the world to be afraid of: not sickness, not even death, certainly not what is coming in the future.

May God bless you- the people of this congregation today and in all the days ahead.

Amen